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AUTHOR Smith, Susan M.
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ABSTRACT

A fourth-grade teacher in a Spanish partial immersion program describes her search for and use of Latin American folk tales to enhance the curriculum and student learning. Excerpts from the teacher's journal over a period of a year, and covering the beginnings of two school years, reflect on her experiences and on student comprehension and participation. Drawing on a videotape recording of class interaction in storytelling (not included here), the paper then identifies ways in which classroom storytelling techniques, content, and related activities can address the National Standards for foreign language learning in the targeted skills areas of communication, cultures, connections, comparisons and communities. (MSE)

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One Teacher's Reflections Using Folktales to Teach the National Standards

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I am a 4th grade teacher at Liberty International Studies Elementary School. I have been teaching at Liberty for 16 years. In our magnet school many students study Spanish, beginning in the first grade. While the program was designed to be partial immersion, it is currently a content-enriched FLES program. Teachers in the program wrote the curriculum. It has always included telling folktales in Spanish. Originally, each grade level was assigned a story that teachers told at various times during the year. In fourth grade, I told "The Three Little Pigs" (a Spanish translation, of course).

About five years ago, I was looking for ways to include more authentic language in my Spanish teaching. I also wanted to use more interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary lessons. As I result, I went in search of Latin American folktales. I chose four stories that fit the Spanish curriculum (food, descriptions of people and animals, clothing, and families). I wrote lesson plans and created materials (visuals, worksheets, etc.) for Spanish class, but also for other subject areas that were related in social studies, science, reading, and health. As an elementary teacher, I have more freedom and time to take lessons across the curriculum since I have my homeroom class for four of eight periods a day.

Time for Reflection

When I began to implement the new approach to the standard curriculum, I also began keeping a journal in which I wrote about success, concerns, and ideas for change. Keeping a journal became an integral part of my reflective thinking as a teacher. David Nunan and Clarice Lamb say that reflective thinking "assumes that professional growth is a lifelong process, and that obtaining initial certification is only a first step in this process. Reflecting on one's teaching, and in the process,

developing knowledge and theories of teaching is an essential component in this lifelong process.... Reflective teachers are ones who are capable of monitoring, critiquing and defending their actions in planning, implementing and evaluating language programs." (*The Self-Directed Teacher: Managing the Learning Process* 1996; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 120)

All teachers must engage in reflective thinking if they are to continually improve and develop in ways that will benefit students. Here are some questions that promote reflective thinking: What did I do that worked well? What could have gone better? How does this lesson fit with what students already knew? With the last lesson? How will it fit with what I plan for tomorrow? Next week? What effect does it have on student's behavior? What was their response? Can I increase student participation? If things went less than perfectly(!), what could I do to make the lesson go more smoothly next time? Why were there problems? Some people are reflective by nature, but we can all learn to reflect more and to improve our teaching.

Below are a few excerpts from my journal that show some of my reflection on student comprehension and involvement:

- October 8, 1994, p. 13: I told "Bandalee" Tuesday...During the storytelling, I had students repeat 'misma cabesa, mismas patas, misma cola, mimso carapacho' numerous times. They also said, 'bandalii, señor tortuga, bandalii, Anansi' at appropriate times. They were, therefore, more involved -- one of my goals after the first story (told in English). Telling a story they don't know in Spanish, however, is much more work. I did much more monitoring of their faces to see if they were understanding. I was nervous, but that I expected since I'm still new at storytelling in general and doing it in Spanish in particular.... I thought the students understood the gist of the story. As they went back to their desks to write/respond in their journals, I heard several of them say they understood little or nothing. I wonder if it is their perception or if they really understood little. The few journals

I have read after they wrote echo the same theme.... This next week I will work with Anansi related activities again. I also think that I will retell the story after all the work so students can put it all together and hopefully understand more.

- October 10, 1994, p. 16. Today I finally took time to work with follow-up activities [to "Bandalee"]. It was difficult as I expected because the students hadn't really understood enough of the story the first time... They didn't think they had understood, and in work today I came to the same conclusion. I retold pieces of the story, working with visuals. I even used two students to show a race. There were several times when there were 'ah-ha's' as I worked today. finally they were understanding.... I see several possibilities: 1. I didn't do enough preparation before the story so they could understand -- probably in my concern for not giving away too much of the story; 2. I didn't explain enough as I told the story; 3. I hadn't found enough or appropriate visuals; or, 4. a combination of the above. I am learning too. We all felt much better after today's class.

- November 13, 1994, p. 19. I want to work with the recipes before I tell the story of Maria so that the students better understand and can participate in the storytelling when I do it.

- December 10, 1994, p. 23. I told "Maria" on Monday Dec. 5.... I knew that the storytelling would be much longer since we were 'cooking' for each of the three recipes, but decided it would work since they had already 'cooked' and liked doing that. It did work out well... my impression is that the students were actively involved and engaged. They definitely seemed to understand. When I got to the cemetery part, they did understand that Maria dug up a body for the tripe. There were 'yuck sounds form most of the group.... They had good questions that showed me that they had understood....

- October 6, 1995, p. 3: I am gearing up to tell the first story in Spanish -- "Juanillo y el tallo de frijoles." I am nervous. Last year's first experience was such a comprehensive failure. I am concerned that this will be the same. Still, I will prepare as I can. I wonder how to best prepare the students for a positive experience for the first story.

- October 13, 1995, p. 5. I told the first story yesterday, "Juanillo." It was a rushed day.... I told the story but felt that I had more false starts in sentences than usual.... First I had the students practice some verbs [needed in the story]; then they acted these out during the story. This year's first story went much better than last year's! They seemed to understand.... They participated in ways I had planned, but there was little unplanned involvement.

Many of my journal entries reflect day to day, practical concerns about time and organization. These are normal, important aspects of teaching day to day. In addition, however, I used the journal as a time to reflect on how my teaching was being received by students. True reflective thinking goes beyond day-to-day considerations. My concerns, as shown in the entries I have shared with you, often centered around student comprehension and involvement. How could I improve it? Could I involve them more? These reflections have helped and guided me as I continue to grow both as a storyteller and a Spanish teacher. I am a better storyteller. I can get students to understand an unknown story in their second language -- even the first time they hear it! At the same time, I continue to reflect and push my work even further.

Reflecting on the National Standards

A couple of years ago, I began to hear about the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning. I had been following the national standards movements in other subject areas such as mathematics and language arts. I was pleased to see foreign language standards too. I was pleased to realize that my movement toward integrating

other subject matter into my Spanish classes and using Spanish to teach more content in other classes fit well with the goals of the national standards. Still, I knew that there was more I could learn and that my teaching could improve if I spent more time understanding and putting into practice these new standards. My reflective thinking, then, began to include the five C's: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities.

(Pass out one page summary of the standards.) Many of you are already familiar with the standards. Here is a one-page summary that we can use in today's discussion.

At this point I'd like to share a few minutes of a videotape of me telling a story to my class to provide a context for discussion. This story is "María Angula," a spooky tale from Ecuador that I have related to the food unit. We did a lot of preparation before the story: practicing food vocabulary, describing characters, and "preparing" recipes using Total Physical Response (TPR). The students, however, did not know the story. Because we incorporated "making" the food into the story, this story-telling session lasted about 40 minutes. In this story, Maria, as a young girl spent much more time playing than doing chores and learning how to cook. After she was márried, she went to the neighbor, who was a good cook, each time her husband asked for a food she didn't know how to prepare. The neighbor, Mercedes, began to get annoyed since Maria was ungrateful, each time saying "Oh, I knew that!" after Mercedes provided the recipes. Mercedes decided to play a trick on Maria to teach her a lesson. The part of the story I am showing you is what Mercedes has told Maria to do in order to make "Tripas Cocidas," cooked tripe. As you watch the video, think about how the 5 C's of the national standards can be addressed in this type of storytelling.

(Show 4 minutes of video.)

Now, in small groups, please identify 3 - 5 ways that the standard I assign your group is realized through folktales.

(Groups work for 5-10 minutes.)

(As the participants share their ideas with the group, I will put up the list I have prepared on the overhead projector so that we can add to the list.)

Suggested Connections

To help you get started with storytelling and with reflecting on how stories encourage students to meet the national standards, I have generated a list of suggestions for each of the five C's. I'm sure you can add more as you think about it!

- Communication
  - Identify food pictures with Spanish vocabulary
  - Develop listening comprehension
  - Talk about the story to each other and the teacher in Spanish
  - Sequence pictures, describing them
  - Identify scenes from the folktale as from the beginning, middle, or end
  - Read the recipes in Spanish
  - Identify the characters
  - Complete a story map
  - Act out scenes from the story
  - Prepare the story as a play for others to see

- Cultures
  - Identify food and other products of the culture from the folktale
  - Identify themes and lessons of the story and show how they reflect the country

- Identify cultural traits of the people of the area included in the folktale

- Connections -- These connections can be made in the other subject areas if you teach them, or if you can work with the other teachers. They can also be made in Spanish class by designing content-based lessons in Spanish.
  - Health -- food unit
  - Math -- quantities for recipes, doubling them, etc.
  - Language arts -- writing epitaphs, describing favorite lunch on a brown bag to be used later, describing how to do something (making a recipe, eating an Oreo)
  - Art -- draw scenes, design a tombstone for themselves or someone famous
  - Science -- explore how foods grow; categorize kinds of plants, animals
  - Reading -- read other versions of the story (in English or Spanish); read to get further information about the culture or country
  - Geography/History -- find the country on the map; identify latitude and longitude of major cities; discuss how geography of the area affects the culture
  - Technology -- This area is generally not a separate subject, but is integrated into other areas. I mention it separately because many valuable connections can be made to other cultures, people, and ideas through the Internet and e-mail. You can look for appropriate e-mail partners, websites, and newsgroups.
  - Personal connections -- Students can connect what they learn about the story and culture to their own lives. Designing activities in this area includes aspects of connections, comparisons, and communities. In addition, students can communicate in the target language to express what they think, learn, like, etc.
- Comparisons
  - Compare culture of the story and students -- roles of characters, etc.

- Compare various versions of the folktale - from around the world
- Compare clothing or food in story to what they had expected
- Compare measurement in recipes in the target culture and ours
- Compare kinds of food eaten
- Identify cognates used in the folktale
- Compare idiomatic expressions in the story with what they use in English

- Communities
  - Compare the Day of the Dead in Mexico and Halloween in the US.
  - Have students create and act out skits of restaurant scenes -- in US and/or the culture being studies.
  - Visit a local Latin American restaurant, esp. if workers there will speak in Spanish.
  - Taste food of the culture.
  - Find penpals or e-mail pals from the culture/country being studied.
  - Find a teacher in the country who will tell the same story and do similar activities so that they can compare and correspond.
  - Prepare the story as a play for parents to see.
  - Search out appropriate websites and newsgroups, especially those in Spanish

Now I'd like to show you the same part of the same story told in a different year. Let's do a little reflective thinking! As you watch, look for ways that the storytelling is different. To what do you attribute these changes? What could I have done to make the session more effective? Are there ways I could have incorporated the national standards more?

(Show María from 2nd year.)

(Participants will discuss the questions posed before the video for 5 minutes.)

It's Your Turn

Now I would like you to reflect on your own teaching and classroom situations. Let's pick one standard area -- comparisons. In small groups, talk about lessons you currently teach that fit this standard. How could you improve what you are currently doing? Are there things that others around you do that you could incorporate? How could you provide lessons that would help the students meet that standard?

(Participants work in groups for about 7 minutes.)

Let's share some of the ideas you discussed.

Are there any questions?

Maybe your ideas are related to folktales and maybe they are related to other activities you do. We must go from the known to the unknown, so start where you are. Can you make more explicit the connections between activities you already use and the national standards? I believe we all can. Write a journal to think things through. Talk to colleagues to share and extend ideas. Professional growth *is* a life-long process. Let's nourish and fertilize each other.

Susan M. Smith
Liberty International Studies Elementary School
601 Filbert Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15232
smsmith@pps.pgh.pa.us